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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 002415

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PK](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#)
SUBJECT: NEW IRI POLL: MUSHARRAF DOWN, NAWAZ UP, AND
ZARDARI'S GOP TREADING WATER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Peter W. Bodde, Reasons 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: The results of the latest International Republican Institute (IRI) poll quantified clear political trends in Pakistan. Nawaz Sharif's popularity grew to 83 percent because there is solid support across party lines for key components of his campaign -- President Pervez Musharraf's ouster and reinstatement of the deposed judiciary. Based on that platform, Nawaz's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) party gained on the Pakistan People's Party (PPP); if elections were held today, the poll showed the PML-N winning 36 percent of the vote versus 32 percent for the PPP. Despite the switch in party dominance, this means neither party has enough support yet to rule alone; 58 percent wanted the coalition to stay together. Musharraf's popularity dropped to 9 percent, with much of his previous support shifting to Nawaz. With rising food and fuel prices, 93 percent listed economic concerns as the nation's number one priority. The poll, taken June 1-15, revealed hope that the new PPP-led government could deliver relief; Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani received a 64 percent favorability rating.

12. (C) Trends in support for the war on terror appeared to reflect the decline in suicide bombings in the settled areas since the February 18 elections. There was a drop in those who believed religious extremism, al Qaeda and the Taliban were serious problems. Most supported Gilani's three-pronged anti-terrorism strategy of negotiations, force if needed, and development, but 71 percent favored political dialogue with extremists and 65 percent supported peace deals. Support for cooperating with the U.S. in the war on terror was up slightly, but al Qaeda received an 18 percent favorability rating, the Taliban rated 23 percent, and only 5 percent had a favorable opinion of the U.S. End Summary.

Baseline

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13. (C) IRI conducted June 1-15 its eighth poll in two years, interviewing in-person over 3,000 Pakistanis nationwide. IRI's Regional Program Director Tom Garrett and Country Program Director Rob Varsalone briefed the Ambassador July 14 on the poll's results. Varsalone reported that select portions of the poll would be released to the Washington Post on July 16, and the PPP and PML-N would be briefed the same day. IRI's last such poll was taken in January, before the PPP took over government, and it intends to conduct the next poll in the Fall with the financial support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and State's Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) Bureau.

Hopes and Fears

14. (C) The poll reflected mixed feelings about the future: 86 percent said the country was moving in the wrong direction and 46 percent said they expected a worse economic future. However, when asked if they felt things would get better now that there was a new government, 52 percent replied "yes." The new government and the parliament are now the most popular institutions with favorable ratings of 85 percent and 81 percent, respectively. Leaders in the new government are also popular, most notably Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, who drew a 64 percent favorability score.

15. (SBU) Economic issues topped Pakistanis' list of concerns: 71 percent identified inflation as the issue of most concern, followed by unemployment (13 percent) and poverty (5 percent). Other issues such as corruption, law and order, democratic reforms, and even suicide bombings barely registered. Reflecting a decline in suicide bombings in the settled areas, the percentage of people who felt more secure rose 20 points to 32 percent.

Musharraf, Judges, and Nawaz

16. (C) The poll demonstrated why PML-N's Nawaz Sharif is successfully pressing his campaign to impeach President Pervez Musharraf and restore the deposed judiciary. Musharraf's support level dropped to 9 percent, and his job

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approval fell to 11 percent, down from January's 15 percent. Support for his ouster grew to 85 percent from 75 percent; surprisingly, 30 percent of Musharraf's own Pakistan Muslim League (PML) agree with this sentiment. Eighty-three percent said they wanted the deposed court reinstated. In addition, when asked how important this issue was to them, 86 percent described it as "important," with 69 percent saying that it was "very important."

17. (SBU) Nawaz has been the main beneficiary of the decline of Musharraf's PML party. With an 82 percent favorability rating, Nawaz is far and away the most dominant political personality in Pakistan today. Likewise, Nawaz easily dominates the "best leader for Pakistan" category, the choice of 38 percent. The poll indicates that PML-N gained an edge on PPP precisely because of its support for restoration of the deposed court (and against Musharraf); 80 percent overall and 82 percent of PPP voters had a higher opinion of the PML-N because of this stated position.

18. (SBU) More importantly, when asked who they would support in future parliamentary elections, PML-N was the choice of 36 percent; in particular, support for the PML-N grew in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). PPP came in second overall with 32 percent, and PML barely registered at four percent. The majority of Pakistanis (58 percent) said they wanted the PPP/PML-N coalition to stay together, but given other choices, 36 percent preferred a PML-N "religious coalition" to 31 percent for a PPP "secular coalition." With 29 percent "undecided," IRI noted similarities between today's developing political scene and Pakistan politics of the 1990s.

The War on Terror

19. (C) IRI does not plan to release to the media most of its findings regarding Pakistanis' attitudes on the war on terrorism. Responses were mixed on the terrorism front, and the number of undecided respondents, particularly Punjabi women, increased. On one hand, 81 percent overall supported PM Gilani's three-pronged strategy of dialogue, force when needed, and development; this may reflect support for the

messenger more than the message. Those supporting cooperation with the U.S. rose from nine to 15 percent, while those opposing cooperation declined from 89 to 71 percent. Educated, wealthy, urban, secular respondents who live farther away from the tribal areas were less inclined to support the war on terror; less educated, poor, rural and religious respondents who live closer to the tribal areas were more inclined to support it.

¶10. (C) While 61 percent said they felt religious extremism was a "serious problem" in the country (down 12 percent from January), only 45 percent said al Qaeda and the Taliban were "serious problems" (also each down about 20 points). Moreover, Pakistanis are rejecting military options to combat extremism: 71 percent supported political dialogue with extremists and 65 percent support the reported peace deals. When respondents were asked their opinion of various groups, Al Qaeda received an 18 percent favorability rating, and the Taliban rated 23 percent. Overall, 88 percent had a negative opinion of the U.S.; only 5 percent had a favorable opinion.

Elections and the Army

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¶11. (SBU) Pakistanis consider February's parliamentary elections to have been mostly "fair;" only 21 percent said that they felt the elections had been rigged.

¶12. (SBU) The Army's positive image, previously in the 80th percentile, now hovers around 60 percent, still high. Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Ashfaq Kayani is also well liked at 37 percent up from 25 percent.

BODDE